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ABSTRACT

The frequency of divorce in America has resulted in an estimated 11,000,000 minor children living in single-parent homes, usually with mothers as heads of households. Psychological disruption observed in children of recently divorced parents may be, in part, related to the quality of the custodial mother's adjustment to her changed life circumstances. Loss of attachment bonds, changes in daily living patterns, excessive role strain, and the amount of continuing interpersonal conflict all contribute to the degree of post-divorce stress. These factors are compounded for the custodial mother with a traditional sex-role orientation; traditional female role structures contribute to post-divorce stress. Economic dependence on a male results in financial insufficiency following divorce. Subordination to male power results in post-divorce powerlessness and feelings of external control. Reliance on the husband for social identity and support systems results in social isolation and over-investment in the super-wife/super-mom role results in post-divorce role strain. Maternal stress may foster negative and coercive childrearing practices which are reflected in the disrupted behavioral and developmental progress of the children. Intervention approaches to mediate the negative image of single parents must include resocialization, remediation, and research. (NRB)

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Sex-role Components of Maternal Stress and Children's Well-being Following Divorce

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Running head: Maternal Stress and Children's Well-being

Sex-role Components of Maternal Stress and Children's Well-being Following Divorce

The statistics on divorcing families in the United States are becoming very familiar. In 1978, there were 1.1 million divorces and 2.2 million marriages, representing an historic level of marital dissolution. Each year, over one million children are involved in these divorces, and current estimates place 11 million minor children in single-parent homes. During the 1970's, between 30-40% of all American children resided for some part of their developing years in a home divided by divorce or marital separation (Bane, 1976; Glick, 1979; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979). If we define normalcy according to a criterion of statistical frequency, it is apparent that marital separation and single-parenting are becoming commonplace states of existence in American family life (Van Dusen & Sheldon, 1976).

In 1978 alone, 19% of all families in the United States with children under the age of 18 were headed by single parents (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979). Although all but 2% of these families were headed by women, the old concern in research on single parenting has not been on the women at all, but has centered on the presumed deleterious effects of father absence on the psychological development of the children. Several excellent reviews have documented the social, affective, cognitive, and adjustment deficits that have been observed to discriminate between children from one-and two-parent families (Herzog & Sudia, 1973; Shinn, 1978). Until very recently, the major independent variable in this research has been the relative availability of the father, and the impact of this availability dimension on children's sex-role development, academic progress, and the incidence of psychopathology,

especially in boys. Critiques of these data, however, have pointed to numerous confounds, including the neglect of factors such as cause of father absence and socioeconomic status of the custodial mother (Blechman & Manning, 1976).

Within the last decade, the newer issues in the effects of single parenting have focussed on child, family, and community variables that might mediate the developmental outcomes associated with growing up in a mother-headed home. Recent research has documented the influence of such factors as characteristics of the children, relationships between the separated or divorcing parents, and the broad network of community support (Kurdek, in press). Today, I would like to center on the psychological well-being of the divorced custodial mother as an antecedent to the adjustment outcomes of her children. I will suggest that at least some of the psychological disruption that we observe in the children of recently divorced parents is intimately related to the quality of the custodial mother's adjustment to her changed life circumstances.

In collaboration with some of my graduate students, we are examining the well-being of newly-divorced custodial mothers within the framework of their sex-role socialization. We are hypothesizing that a positive relationship exists between traditional sex-role functioning in the family unit and indices of custodial mother's post-divorce stress. Other things being equal, we expect divorce-related stress in children to be positively associated with the amount and duration of stress in the custodial parent. The crux of this position is the proposition that the sex-role components of maternal and paternal roles have been barriers to the success of personal readjustment

following divorce. Adherance to traditional sex roles tends to restrict the woman in her range of effective strategies to deal with divorce-related adjustment. The fallout from increased personal stress will be reflected in the custodial mother's interactions with both her children and the noncustodial parent, rendering her less effective in dealing with either one. Although we recognize that sex-role components are not representative of the full range of variables that may influence successful post-divorce adjustment, they form one important set of factors that bears directly on the competence and well-being of custodial mothers and, in reciprocal relationship, on their children's abilities to integrate and accept the events of the divorce. Likewise, we are not ignoring the extent to which individual children may provide reciprocal aversive stimuli for their mothers (Hetherington et al., 1979). In terms of the latter hypothesis of negative child imput, however, it does not negate the differential contribution of sex roles to maternal stress and well-being, but may highlight the interaction between child and mother characteristics.

We have started out with the assumption that regardless of the amount of conflict and alienation within the marriage and of the expressed desirability and locus of initiation of the divorce, marital dissolution is always a stressful life event for all family members (Bloom, Asher & White, 1978; Weiss, 1979). As used in the current context, the concept of stress refers to negative experiences of individuals who are facing more tasks and required behaviors than can be managed with their current behavioral skill, time, and financial resources (Worell & Garret-Fulks, in press). There are at least four major factors that contribute to the degree of

experienced post-divorce stress: the loss of attachment bonds, changes in patterns of daily living, excessive role strain, and the amount of continuing interpersonal conflict. For the divorcing mother with primary responsibility for the custody of one or more young children, dramatic sex-role changes may accompany the loss of the traditional wife role. Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1979) report that two of the major areas of stress for newly-divorced mothers were the loss of identity and the feeling of general incompetence due to lack of socialized cross-gender skills. Following divorce, many women are handicapped by low career aspirations, absent or inconsistent work experience, and under-developed job-related skills.

The factors that contribute to post-divorce stress are compounded for the custodial mother with a traditional sex-role orientation. We are looking at four traditional female role structures that leave the newly divorced mother unprepared for single-again status and that thus contribute to her experience of post divorce stress: I will list them first and then discuss each briefly.

(1) <u>economic dependence on a male</u>, with resulting financial insufficiency following divorce;

(2) <u>subordination to male power</u>, with a resulting powerlessness and feelings of external control following divorce, in her transactions with her children, her former spouse, and the external financial community;

(3) <u>reliance on the husband for social identity and support systems</u>, resulting in social isolation following divorce; and

(4) <u>over-investment in the super-wife super-mom role</u>, with a resulting experience of post-divorce role strain as she attempts to take on all the tasks formerly assumed by two parents (Worell & Garret-Fulks, in press).

We have conceptualized each of these variables as a dimension along which individuals can be scaled. Thus, we assume that all divorcing mothers will experience some degree of each of the four sex-role handicaps, given the structure of contemporary society. Let me explore each of these sex-role handicaps more fully and indicate their predicted relationships to maternal and child well-being.

1. Economic dependence on a male has been the single most salient sex role factor in post-divorce financial insufficiency. Although over 40% of currently married women with young children are in the work force, their jobs or careers are frequently considered as secondary to that of their husbands. The mother and wife who has accepted that her first responsibility is to her husband and children will find herself deficient in work-related education, experience, and skills, or will show an inconsistent pattern of work following marriage. Both of these conditions leave her unprepared to face the economic demands of singleness. In a sample of 4,807 women, Louise Vetter (1978) reports that only 16% were continuously employed after marriage and Astin and Myint (1978) report that in a sample of over 5,000 high school graduates, marital status was a significant predictor of low-paying occupational status, such as office worker, rather than higher paying careers such as scientific or professional.

The economic insufficiency of the custodial single mother is well documented. Poverty rates for single mothers in 1978 were four times the national average, with a medium income of about half of that reported for married couples (Glick, 1979). In addition to reduced buying power, low income women are unable to purchase household help and to arrange for appropriate child care. In a number of recent studies, economic stress in

single mothers has been linked to self-reports of anxiety, depression, and feelings of incompetence in daily living (Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974; Burlage, 1979; Colletta, 1978, Hetherington, 1979). For example, Ann Kazak (Note 1) found that the self-supporter role was the single best predictor of life stress in a group of middle income divorced mothers, yet this was the role in which they felt the least competent. Economic stress in turn is predictive of negative and coercive child rearing practices (Colletta, 1978) and increased rates of children's anxiety and depression as rated by their teachers (Hodges, Wechsler, & Ballantine, 1979). Although we do not minimize the external barriers to fair employment and equitable wages for those women, it seems clear that the traditional sex-role components of women's economic socialization provide pervasive internal barriers to the escape from poverty.

2. The second traditional role that we are examining is the subordinate position that women assume in their power relationships with men. The traditional woman has learned to deny her anger and assertiveness, and to select a helpless/dependent power style in her dealings with men (Johnson, 1974; Falbo & Peplau, Note 2). Finding herself alone without the protection of a man, such women are more likely to feel helpless, vulnerable, and powerless. Powerlessness defines the individual's inability to control important reinforcers. Women who see themselves as powerless tend to be ineffective in three types of control situations: in dealing with daily situations involving home and children, in their inability to influence others in social situations, and in their difficulties in obtaining access to employment and financial opportunities. Lenore Radloff has shown that high rates of depression and low self-esteem are related to women's perceptions of powerlessness (Radloff &

Monroe, 1978). Divorced mothers who perceive themselves to be in losing power struggles with their children and their former spouses are less likely to achieve life satisfaction, and they report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and incompetency (Hetherington, 1979). Hetherington reports a positive relationship between divorced custodial mother's feelings of depression and helplessness and her negative and coercive control strategies with her preschool children. We are also predicting that traditional women are more likely to engage in continuing conflict situations with their former spouse, or else to allow the spouse to disengage himself from his children entirely. Several researchers note that child well-being following divorce is positively related to a cooperative and interactive relationship between the divorced parents (Hess & Camara, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975). We expect that the nontraditional woman will be better able to mediate the post-marital situation with equitable power strategies that benefit both herself and her children in terms of feelings of competency and reduction of interpersonal conflict.

3. Thirdly, traditional women have relied on the marriage for their social identity. Having taken their husband's name, they depend on his associates for their social life, and have achieved social status through his occupation and standing in the community. Loss of the spouse role results in feelings of emptiness and an inadequate network of social support. The recent literature has shown that both within and outside of marriage, support for mothers in the form of task assistance, child care, and emotional acceptance is a significant predictor of personal well-being. Support in any of these forms increases the mother's resistance to feelings of helplessness and

depression, and increases her ability to interact with her children in positive, affectionate, and noncoercive ways (Colletta, Note 3; Zur-Szpiro & Longfellow, Note 4).

4. Finally, we expect that the amount of experienced post-divorce role strain will be related to a traditional sex-role orientation and a restrictive investment in the wife-mother role prior to divorce. I am using role strain here to denote the accumulation of excessive and frequently conflicting task requirements that result in negative and self-deprecating evaluations of the person's task competency and accomplishment (Worell & Garret-Fulks, in press). Stated simply, the person groans while she says "I can't do it all and I'm not doing most of it well". Experienced role strain will interact with and be compounded by each at the previous sex-role variables. The most likely candidate for role strain is the recently divorced custodial mother with several young children at home, inadequate financial resources, conflictful relationships with her former spouse, few friends or relatives to offer support, a traditional sex-role orientation, and limited skills for enacting both mother and father roles (Worell, in press). Although employment outside the home can reduce her financial and isolation problems, it also increases the number of tasks she must complete without a co-parent to share the load. For women who have not worked at all, or only sporadically prior to divorce, the strain in meeting multiple roles will increase. We expect that high role strain will reduce both time and energy resources of the custodial mother and will increase her frequency of coercive and demanding interactions with her young children (cf. Hetherington, 1979; Colletta, Note 3).

In summarizing my remarks so far, I have pointed to four areas of

traditional sex-role socialization that we are predicting will function to increase the post-divorce stress of custodial mothers. Maternal stress, in turn, is predicted to foster negative and coercive child rearing practices, which will be reflected in the disrupted behavior and developmental progress of the children. I regret to report that our sample of recently divorced custodial mothers of children below the age of 12 is still in the process of accumulation, and so the model has yet to be tested.

Finally, I wish to leave you with a more positive note than is reflected in the stresses and strains of post-divorce motherhood. Aside from what our data will nor will not reveal, I believe there is sufficient evidence today to support our constructive intervention in mediating the negative images of single parenting at many levels. The newer issues in single parenting require a three-pronged approach to intervention: resocialization, remediation, and research (Worell & Garret-Fulks, in press). At the resocialization level, I believe it is imperative that we encourage personal and social role development that reduces the task and skill differences between boys and girls, women and men. In terms of remediation, I would hope that therapists who work with divorce-related clients will become more skilled and knowledgeable about the internal and external barriers that restrict women in their effective personal and public functioning. Finally, the research on single parenting needs to move beyond the outcry that deplores father absence, toward exploring the ways in which single parent families function as healthy and productive units.

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